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Newly Paul/KPCC

(L to R) Caseworkers Karen Gage and Yvonne Holman, Ernest Melendrez, caseworker Kendra Tankersley and Ernest's fiancée Launi Perry and their 9-month-old son at the Family Reunification Week celebrations organized by Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Service, in their Vermont Corridor office on March 2, 2010.

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Several families told their success stories at the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services family reunification week celebrations that started March 1.

Kamika Whitaker, 31, clearly remembers the day last year when her three children were taken away by the Department of Children and Family Services.

"The social worker called and said 'You have four hours, get your kids' stuff packed.' Till that time, I thought she was joking," said Whitaker.

She was frustrated, confused and lonely.

"My kids would be here when I went to bed, and I was used to waking up with them around," she said.

Whitaker couldn't handle it.

"I got high. I couldn't understand it. I was like, what did I do? Was it that serious?"

Both Whitaker and her husband Victor Jackson, 42, were substance abusers.

But after a year of counseling and training through drug programs, parenting and counseling classes, and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings at the Department of Children and Family Services, they have turned their lives around.

After being separated from their children for six months, their family was reunited last October.

Whitaker and Jackson, along with two other families, told their stories at DCFS' first Family Reunification Week celebrations.

The week, beginning March 1, was proclaimed "Family Reunification Week" by Gloria Molina, chair of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. The event aimed to highlight DCFS's success stories after recent incidents of neglect and deaths of children in foster care raised questions about the DCFS's commitment to reunify families.

According to data from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, last year there was a 3.6 percent increase in the number of children who were reunified with their families within 12 months.

The figure rose from 61.1 percent in 2008 to nearly 65 percent in 2009.

At the same time, the number of children abused and/or neglected in foster care decreased by 7.3 percent in 2009.

The figure dropped from 440 children in 2008 to 408 in 2009.

The families whose stories were recounted Tuesday at the Vermont Corridor office of DCFS had successfully complied with court requirements. They reunited with their children who had been ordered to be placed out of the home by the court.

Dressed in a yellow sweater dress and wearing large silver hoops in her ears, Whitaker looked happy as she spoke about her new life.

"I have made a heck of a progress, no matter how many obstacles – and I've had many," she said. "No matter what, I still showed up [for the sessions], stayed clean, and sober, and am so happy to have my kids back. I feel like a new mom again."

Ernest Melendrez, 36, was a drug addict, involved with gangs and had been to prison several times.

He and his partners had nine children among them – the oldest being 21, and the youngest 9 months old.

Dominique, his 18-year-old daughter, was living in a foster home. She had run away several times, was performing poorly in school and had relationship troubles.

"When I found out the DCFS had my daughter, I was in prison for possession of drugs and a gun," said Melendrez. "I can remember thinking 'No not again.' A few years prior to that I had just got my daughter out of Child and Family Services, and I had let her down again."

When he got out of prison in 2007, Melendrez was offered an opportunity to reunite with his daughter.

"When I saw her in the courtroom, I knew I was doing something wrong," he said. "I felt dirty. I didn't want to feel like that anymore."

He enrolled in DCFS's emotional literacy class and learned about conflict resolution and violence prevention. He's still enrolled in the Chicago School of Professional Psychology to better understand his behavior.

"I remember when I got the case, it was 12 boxes of documents, and I was really scared," said Yvonne Holman, a social worker who worked with Melendrez. "But I do remember him saying he wanted his daughter and was willing to do anything to get her home."

Caseworker Kendra Tankersley remembers Melendrez riding the bus from a halfway house in downtown L.A. to Paramount and Whittier to meet his daughter.

"He made every visit, every IEP, every school visit," said Tankersley. "He just was there, no matter what."